



# Purple Plague

## Loosestrife Appearance Belies Noxious Tendencies

Story and Photos  
by Craig Bihrlé

Blooming brilliantly as a mid-summer accent to residential lawn features, it's difficult to comprehend the dark side of purple loosestrife. Yet there it is, listed prominently next to leafy spurge and Canada thistle, on the roster of plants considered noxious in North Dakota.

Despite its popularity as an ornamental flower, purple loosestrife is a deserving representative on the list of weeds state officials would like to eliminate. While its presence in North Dakota is still limited, loosestrife has invaded thousands of acres

in states to the east, and North Dakota seems a prime candidate for expansion.

Purple loosestrife is a tall, slender plant highlighted by a rocket-shaped cluster of small purple-pink flowers at the top. It is not native to North America, but is another in a long line of plants and animals that people brought innocently from other continents and caused harm in this country.

Under the genus name *Lythrum*, purple loosestrife was probably sold in North Dakota for more than 50 years as garden plant, until the state legislature declared it a noxious weed in 1996. In the wild, it grows along stream and wetland edges. It can spread rapidly, crowding out native plants and monopolizing large shallow-water areas. Few native fish, birds and other wildlife benefit from loosestrife's presence, and almost all species are harmed in some way.

North Dakota's landscape is dominated by wetlands in the east and north, and small creeks and rivers in the west. Since Minnesota harbors widespread loosestrife infestations, perhaps more than 50,000 acres total, in more than 75 percent of the state's counties, the potential for westward expansion remains a serious concern.

North Dakota currently has nearly 200 acres of loosestrife, according to Dean Cline, noxious weed specialist for the North Dakota Department of Agriculture. Much of that is along rivers in and around major cities like Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot and Valley City. Barnes County has 30 acres, Burleigh 37, Grand Forks 60, Walsh 25 and Ward 15, Cline noted.

State officials would just as soon keep it that way. "If we've learned anything from the weeds that are already big problems in the state," said Rod Lym, North Dakota State University plant science professor, "it's that it's much more effective to get after problems early. Once we start talking about thousands of acres of infestation, the control becomes much more costly and complex."



*Despite its designation as a state noxious weed, many homeowners and at least one city park district in North Dakota still maintain purple loosestrife in flower gardens.*

With noxious weed designation in 1996, the legislature prohibited further sale or propagation of loosestrife seed or plants.

Purple loosestrife typically blooms in early July and maintains its flowers until the first frost. It is readily visible in August, and that's why state officials urge North Dakota citizens to report to county weed officers any suspected infestation in waterways or wetlands. "With such a small infestation," Lym said, "we have a very good chance for keeping this weed contained."

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## Managers Vigilant for Loosestrife on WMAs

Many of the State Game and Fish Department's wildlife management areas contain wetlands or river bottoms where purple loosestrife could establish an unwelcome presence. So far, only one WMA out of nearly 180 – Sweet Briar west of Mandan – has a confirmed loosestrife invasion, and that is limited to "little spots here and there," according to wildlife technician Leo Vetter. Department personnel treat whatever loosestrife they find with chemicals, Vetter noted, which keeps annual advance in check, but so far has not eliminated the plant from the WMA.

However, all six district wildlife resource managers are aware of loosestrife in nearby areas that could easily spread into WMAs. "We're always concerned and mindful of potential weed introductions because we don't want to go down the (leafy) spurge road again," said Brian Kietzman, who manages WMAs in southeastern North Dakota from the Department's Jamestown office. "I know that loosestrife has been found along the Sheyenne River so it is a definite concern for this district."